



BIRTHPLACE

Harley Refsal was born in 1944 in Morris, Minnesota.

CHILDHOOD

Mr. Refsal grew up on a farm outside the small town of Hoffman, Minnesota. The farm was homesteaded by his grandparents, immigrants from Norway. His mother was born and raised there, and both his father and grandfather worked with wood. Mr. Refsal said his craft was “the water in which I swam.” He made his own toys from the ends of fruit crates and doesn’t know a time when he didn’t create things from wood.

HIGHER EDUCATION

Mr. Refsal attended Augsburg College in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He holds a Divinity degree from Luther College Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, and also studied in Rauland, Norway, and in Oslo, Norway.

POSITION

Mr. Refsal is Associate Professor of Scandinavian Folk Art at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa.

INSPIRATION/INFLUENCE

The traditions and culture of Norway influence Mr. Refsal’s life and work. His mother and aunts knitted and tatted. It was natural to decorate, and to create great objects for everyday use. His two grandmothers did quilting and Hardanger embroidery. One of his uncles had a very well equipped workshop. This uncle had time for him—which was unusual for a child to find. Mr. Refsal says, “You can tell the story of Norwegian art in three words: Wood, wood, wood.”

BIOGRAPHY

Harley Refsal

At the age of twenty, Mr. Refsal went on a tour to Norway with a choir for three weeks and he found this particularly inspirational. When he saw the wood carving he felt “love at first sight.” Architectural details “grabbed me in,” he says. The trip made him realize that family is very significant. It was powerful to research who and what were behind the traditions.

ART FORM

Mr. Refsal works with wood, bone, antler, and other materials. These are “the plastics of the pre-industrial era.” The hallmark of traditional Scandinavian art is that the objects are made for everyday use. He makes fish hooks of bone and antler. In the past, knitting needles and manicure sets were made of bone and horn.

WEB SITE

www.iowaartscouncil.org/programs/folk-and-traditional-arts/iowa-roots/season-two/harley-refsal.shtml

ARTWORK DISPLAYED

Luther College Library, Decorah, Iowa
Vesterheim Norwegian American Museum,
Decorah, Iowa

Art & Technique of Scandinavian Style Woodcarving and Woodcarving in the Scandinavian Style by Harley Refsal